



Natural History Collection

Introduction

The National Park Service is one of the primary Federal agencies that preserves natural resources and is a major repository for natural history collections in the United States. National Park Service museum collections represent a multitude of disciplines. These collections are directly related to park specific themes and resources. While natural history collections represent a relatively small portion of the total museum collections of the agency, these collections are growing rapidly as research activities are conducted in parks.

Management Needs

Staff members at Shenandoah National Park collect and maintain natural history specimens for three primary reasons. These are 1) for use in educational and interpretive programs, 2) for use as reference material, and 3) to support scientific study.

Educational or interpretive props are used by park staff in situations where they are giving public presentations and the prop is useful in illustrating particular points. Most often these are animal skins, antlers, rock samples, or nests. While photographs are valuable, the actual object, in hand, provides opportunity for detailed observation and use of multiple senses. In limited circumstances, live specimens may be used in this context.

The park also maintains a Reference Collection. This collection is housed at park headquarters and is used by park staff in training of other park employees and for comparative purposes when material is brought in from the field for identification. Generally storage methods of this material resemble those of the Museum Collection but access to the material is not controlled, environmental conditions are not closely monitored or controlled, and the specimens are subject to frequent handling.

The Reference Collection has varying degrees of completeness in terms of representation of all taxa known to exist in the park. Some groups will be more complete than others.

Finally, the park maintains a Natural History Museum Collection. At this writing, it is unclear where this collection will be stored but it is unlikely that it will be in the park but instead with a cooperating museum. This collection exists for two primary reasons. First, each specimen provides physical evidence of the presence of that organism in the park at one point in time – they are vouchers. Second, this collection is intended to be a resource for research that is available to those that are

conducting specimen- based investigations. In limited instances, the material may be used for reference purposes when the Reference Collection does not include taxa of interest.

Current Activities

Educational and interpretive props are maintained by the park's Interpretive Division. Infrequently the Natural Resources Branch may provide specimens to the Interpretive Division or may identify material that staff from the Interpretive Division finds.

The Natural Resources Branch currently maintains a small Reference Collection. It consists primarily of botanical and fish specimens. Neither collection is exhaustive in terms of representation of park taxa but the collection is adequate for most purposes. Additions are made regularly to the botanical collection.

The park also maintains a Natural History Museum Collection but this collection is in need of substantial work. Accessioning and cataloging records are incomplete, identification of many specimens is incomplete, and current storage arrangements are sub- standard. Park staff members are gradually working on correcting these problems.

